

Andrea Horwath, Leader of the Ontario New Democratic Party (NDP)

Dear Ms. Horwath,

Collectively, [Decoding Dyslexia Ontario](#), [The International Dyslexia Association Ontario](#), and [Dyslexia Canada](#) work to advocate for, and give voice to, the children in Ontario who experience dyslexia and other difficulties learning to read. We have taken a keen interest in the upcoming provincial election and policy initiatives.

Dyslexia is a hereditary condition that can affect one's ability to read accurately and fluently. It can also affect reading comprehension, spelling, and writing. However, dyslexia is not related to intelligence, and when students at risk for dyslexia are identified early and provided with additional targeted instruction starting in kindergarten, the reading difficulties associated with dyslexia can be greatly reduced or even avoided.

Dyslexia impacts Ontarians from all backgrounds. It is estimated that at least 15% of all students have dyslexia, resulting in over 300,000 Ontario students and their families currently impacted by this issue. When dyslexia is not identified and supported, students often experience years of frustration and failure in mastering foundational reading skills. These difficulties can compound over time and lead to challenges in other aspects of school, behaviour, and mental health.

In 2019, the Ontario Human Rights Commission initiated a public inquiry into the challenges faced by children with reading disabilities. The Commission's report, '[Right to Read](#),' was issued in February 2022 and made 157 recommendations. Our organizations are interested in how Ontario's public officials will respond to these recommendations.

Attached to this letter is a list of questions being submitted to each of the political parties currently represented in the Legislative Assembly as well as additional background information on dyslexia and the OHRC recommendations. We encourage and welcome your party's response to these questions at the earliest opportunity. These answers will be shared on our respective websites for the general public, as well as interested members, parents, and supporters of the dyslexia community.

Responses may be provided by email to Alicia Smith (president@IDAOntario.com). In the meantime, please do not hesitate to contact Alicia by phone at (705) 427-9544 with any questions, or should you wish additional information surrounding this important issue.

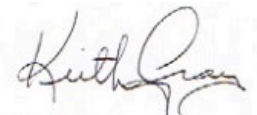
Respectfully,



Alicia Smith
President IDA Ontario



Annette Sang
Decoding Dyslexia



Keith Gray
President Dyslexia Canada

CC: Joe Harden, Marit Styles

Our organizations are respectfully submitting the following questions to each of the political parties currently represented in the Legislative Assembly. We encourage and welcome responses on behalf of the Ontario children and families affected by this significant reading disability.

1. Recognition of Dyslexia

Will your party commit to implementing the OHRC recommendations that the Ministry of Education, faculties of education and school boards explicitly recognize the term "dyslexia"?

How will your party work to improve dyslexia awareness in the province in general and within Ontario's public education system specifically?

2. Curriculum and Reading Instruction

Is your party committed to implementing the changes to the curriculum and instructional guides recommended by the OHRC?

3. Universal Screening

What is your party's position on implementing the OHRC recommendations to screen all children for risk factors associated with reading difficulties twice a year from Kindergarten Year 1 to Grade 2?

4. Reading Intervention

Is your party committed to implementing the OHRC's recommendations regarding the equitable and timely provision of effective reading interventions for ANY student who meets the criteria?

5. Support for Teachers

How will your party work to ensure that Ontario's teachers are empowered with the knowledge, skills, and resources necessary to ensure that every student can realize their right to read?

Facts and Figures

1. Recognition of Dyslexia

Dyslexia or a reading disability in word reading is a specific learning disability characterized by difficulties with accurate and/or fluent word reading and/or poor decoding and spelling abilities. Dyslexia is the most common learning disability, and learning disabilities are the most prevalent special education exceptionality in Ontario. This means that dyslexia/reading disabilities are the most prevalent disabilities in schools, it is estimated that over 300,000 students in the Ontario public education system are impacted by dyslexia.

The Inquiry found that the Ontario education system currently does not recognize the term dyslexia, instead using only the term learning disability. On reports such as Individual Education Plans (IEP's) it is not specified if the learning disability affects word reading or another area such as mathematics. A lot of valuable information for planning and tracking is therefore lost and both teachers & parents are confused as to how to help. Many individuals also prefer the term dyslexia and the OHRC has stated that under the Code, people's preferred self-identification should be respected and recognized. [Recommendations 51, 54, 55, 56, 114, 126]

2. Curriculum and Reading Instruction

The OHRC concluded that Ontario's current curriculum and approach to teaching foundational reading and writing skills is not only failing students with dyslexia, but also many other students.

"Students with other disabilities, including intellectual disabilities, autism spectrum disorder and hearing disabilities, may also struggle to learn to read when ineffective approaches are used in the classroom. Because of marginalization and structural inequality, Black and other racialized students, First Nations, Métis and Inuit students, multilingual students, or students from low-income backgrounds are also at increased risk for reading difficulties. Approaches to teaching early reading that build skills for decoding words and language comprehension have been proven to work best for all students, and are essential for many students".

The OHRC recommended that the province revise the Ontario's Kindergarten Program, Language curriculum and related instructional guides to remove use of cueing systems for word reading and instead require mandatory explicit and systematic instruction in foundational word reading skills [Recommendations 27 to 30].

3. Universal Screening

When early reading difficulties are not identified there are serious consequences for the student and for the education system. Age four to seven is a critical window of opportunity for teaching children foundational word-reading skills, this is when intervention is most effective and efficient. When intervention is delayed, students require more intense support over a longer period to catch up. This places an enormous burden on special education services and currently demand outstrips available resources.

The OHRC recommended that the Ministry of Education mandate and standardize evidence-based universal screening. Specifically, that school boards screen every student twice a year from kindergarten to Grade 2 using valid and reliable screening tools chosen from a list of screening tools vetted and approved by the Ministry of Education.

4. Reading Intervention

The Right to Read Inquiry report concluded that:

"Ontario's approach to reading interventions is deficient resulting in many students failing to learn foundational word-reading skills. When this happens, our education system has failed these students."

The OHRC recommended that the Ministry of Education create a list of reading interventions that school boards would be required to choose from, and that school boards immediately stop using reading interventions that do not have a strong evidence base for students who struggle with word reading, and students at risk for or identified with dyslexia. [Recommendation 69, 70].

Additionally, the OHRC recommended that the Ministry of Education develop a consistent research-informed student selection criteria for intervention programs, remove inappropriate eligibility criteria for interventions, such as requiring a learning disability diagnosis or that the student not have a co-existing disability, and implement data collection measures to ensure that ALL students who meet the criteria for intervention receive intervention. [Recommendations 71, 72, 75 to 78].

5. Teacher Training

Only 4% of Ontario educated teachers who took part in the Right to Read Inquiry agreed that they learned the necessary skills in their teacher education program to teach students with reading disabilities to read.

The Right to Read Inquiry concluded that:

"Currently, teacher education and professional development places little emphasis on how skilled reading develops and how to teach word reading using direct and systematic instruction in foundational word reading skills. Teachers also learn little about evidence-based early screening and reading interventions, or how to identify and effectively respond to struggling readers."

The OHRC recommends that Ontario provides all current teachers with professional development related to dyslexia awareness and how to support students with dyslexia in the classroom. Additionally, elementary teachers should be provided with additional training in how to deliver explicit, systematic, and direct instruction in foundational word reading skills, how to effectively implement screening, and how to deliver evidence-based reading interventions. [Recommendation 66, 83 to 85].